

CHAPTER 1

The Cinderella from Livland

(Catherine I)

Emperor Peter the Great died in the early morning of January 28, 1725, in his small bedroom-study on the second floor of the Winter Palace. His death did not come easy. Excruciating pain wracked his body; the best efforts of experienced doctors brought no relief, and death was to him a deliverance from unbearable suffering.¹

But the first Russian emperor, like almost anyone else, did not want to die. More than once he had looked death straight in the eye on battlefields and stormy seas; yet now he was clinging desperately to life and, according to one contemporary, “grew very fainthearted and even displayed a petty fear of death.”² He prayed fervently and frenziedly, confessing and taking communion several times. Attending priests did not leave his bedside; he wept and clutched their hands. It seemed as if he were using the Orthodox priests’ brocade chasubles, gleaming in the faint candlelight, as a screen against death, which stared at him steadily from the darkness of night.

The tsar, always merciless toward any violators of his strict laws, gave the order to release criminals from jails and to forgive government officials their debts and fines, an act that, according to Russian custom, was supposed to save his soul. Until the very end he had hope in God’s mercy as well as in his own vitality, for he was only fifty-two years old and there were so many ideas and plans for the future ahead . . .

The teary-eyed empress Catherine Alekseevna, a stout, comely woman, did not leave the bedside of the dying tsar in the crowded study (big as a giant, the tsar was fond of small cozy rooms with low ceilings). She tried to

comfort him, but he hardly looked in her direction. It can be said with certainty that, during the last hours of his life, agonizing contemplation of Russia's future tormented the great reformer no less than his physical anguish. It was for her sake he had toiled so in merciless disregard of his own strength and health; in her name he had forced his subjects to study, build, sail the seas, die in battles and in grueling labor. Peter had created a great empire and now, leaving life, he was in despair. He did not know to whom to bequeath this great heritage: the ancestral throne of the Muscovite tsars exalted by him with the imperial crown in 1721; the young capital of the empire, St. Petersburg; a victorious two hundred thousand-man army; a



Peter the Great. From A. V. Morozov, *Katalog moego sobraniia russkikh gravirovannykh i litografirovannykh portretov* (Catalogue of My Collection of Engraved and Lithographed Portraits), vol. 3 (Moscow, 1913), folio CCCXXXIX.

formidable navy; a country so vast it stretched from the Baltic Sea to the Pacific Ocean. And there was no one in the world who could alleviate either the corporal or the spiritual agony of the great tsar. Relatives, associates, and old friends crowded around him. But in his hour of death there was no one there for him to rely on, no one on whom his gaze could rest hopefully.

Legend has it that Peter tried to write a will just before his death, but succeeded in scratching only two words on the paper: "Leave everything . . ." and then he lost control of his hand. Facts dispute this legend's authenticity. The last word that Archbishop Feofan Prokopovich heard the emperor utter was the word "later," which was accompanied by one last impatient and abrupt gesture, as if to say: "Go away everybody, leave me alone; I will make my decision later." That is probably what he wanted to tell the people who stood over him.

But "later" never came. The tsar who had ruled Russia for more than thirty years died at 5:15 A.M. on January 28. It was the end of a great era, and new, troubled times lay ahead.

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Actually, those times had arrived several hours before Peter's death. Beyond the walls of the study where he lay dying, confusion and alarm prevailed. The absence of a will by Peter the Great created a dramatic situation. The fate of the imperial throne would have to be decided in a clash of court factions, small groups of nobility, high-ranking government officials, and generals. There were two rival factions. One comprised the tsar-reformer's closest associates, statesmen who came to power thanks to their abilities and Peter's particular favor. He surrounded himself with only the most loyal and energetic people, regardless of their birth.

Considered first among Peter's associates was His Most Serene Prince Aleksandr Menshikov. About the same age as Peter, he was for many years the tsar's favorite. The illiterate son of a court stableman, he started out as a batman, and later rose to field marshal general, and in another sphere a member of the British Royal Society. Apparently, the president of the society, the great Isaac Newton, could not refuse the persistent and impudent petitioner from St. Petersburg without offending his sovereign, Peter the Great.

Menshikov's allies were very influential people: the chancellor of the empire, Count Gavriil Golovkin; Archbishop Feofan Prokopovich, who administered the Russian Orthodox Church; the chief of the Secret Chancery, Count Peter Tolstoi; the procurator-general of the Senate, Count Pavel Iaguzhinskii; and Aleksei Makarov, Peter the Great's personal secretary. These were "new" persons whose power and influence could come to an end with Peter's death. So in spite of some internal animosity they immediately rallied in unison behind Empress Catherine, Peter's wife, who was made of the

same stuff as they. Like them she was not of noble birth, owed her position to Peter's graces, and was full of initiative and determination.

On one of the rare occasions when Catherine left her dying husband's bedroom, these dignitaries held a meeting; several Guards' officers were also present. Catherine's sad expression, the moving and affectionate words she used when addressing them—forsaken fledglings of Peter's nest—and, finally, generous promises, all had an effect, and the Guards pledged to help Catherine ascend the throne by thwarting Grand Duke Peter Alekseevich, the candidate from the other faction.

The grand duke was Peter the Great's grandson and the son of the late tsarevich Aleksei Petrovich. Though he was only nine years old, he constituted a menace to the new people. On his side was the tradition of succession to the throne through the direct male line of descent, in this case from grandfather to grandson; he was also supported by the high-born nobility—the Dolgorukii and Golitsyn princes, and others who were discontented with Peter's reforms. Also on the side of Peter's grandson were all those who sought an easing of the rigid policies of the regime and hoped for a respite from the furious pace of reform that Peter the Great had started in Russia.

Both court factions were prepared to fight for power, but everyone was waiting for Peter's eyes to close forever. This is how Count Henning Frederick Bassewitz from Holstein, a participant and witness of the events that occurred in the dramatic early morning hours of the 28th of January, described the situation: "We awaited the moment when the monarch would breathe his last so that we could set to work. As long as there was still a sign of life in him nobody dared to do anything: so deep were the respect and fear which this hero evoked in the people."³ This is accurate, for the magic force of Peter the Great was strong. Reason also called for waiting—it had happened in history so many times before that a dying ruler suddenly recovered, and woe to those who had thought that his last hour had come.

Then the clock struck five and shortly thereafter doctors announced an end to the agony—Peter the Great no longer belonged to the people: he now belonged to God and to history. The final act of the political drama began. Both actors and spectators gathered in a brightly illuminated hall of the Winter Palace: senators, presidents of colleges (government departments), church hierarchs, generals, and senior officers. The crowd murmured excitedly. Suddenly all fell silent—the doors opened and into the room hurried Menshikov, Golovkin, and Makarov, followed by the empress herself. Her voice choked with grief, Catherine broke the anticipated but startling news that their sovereign, her beloved husband, "has passed to his eternal rest," leaving behind his orphaned subjects. Then she composed herself, as she had done so often, and spoke courageously and resolutely. At the end of her short speech she made it known that she would competently continue the policies of the late emperor, be attendant to her subjects, and promote the welfare of the empire, whose throne Peter the Great had shared with her.

CHAPTER 2

The Poor Relative Who Became Empress (Anna Ioannovna)

The night of January 18, 1730, was a sleepless one for many Muscovites. The Russian autocrat Peter II (Alekseevich) lay dying in the Lefortovo Palace, his imperial residence on the Iauza River. He had caught cold twelve days earlier, on January 6, while taking part in the Epiphany celebration on the frozen Moscow River. To complicate matters he came down with smallpox, a common disease in those days. At first the tsar became delirious, then his fever continued to rise, and by the night of January 18 he was in a grave state. The doctors, priests, and courtiers keeping constant watch at his bedside could do nothing to help their sovereign: Peter II died without regaining consciousness. According to contemporaries his last words were: "Harness the sledge, I want to drive to my sister's."¹ The tsar's sister, the Grand Duchess Natalia, had died in the autumn of 1728. The night of January 18 was a terrifying one for Russia. Not only had the tsar died, the autocrat, a fourteen-year-old boy who should have lived a long full life, but with him died the last direct descendant of the male line of the Romanov dynasty, which extended back to its founder and the first Romanov tsar Mikhail Fedorovich (1613–1645). Now Aleksei Mikhailovich's great grandson, Peter the Great's grandson, son of Tsarevich Aleksei, was dead. Everyone present that night in the Lefortovo Palace was thinking the same thing: "Who will inherit the throne?"

Many times in Russian history, after the death of a ruler who had left behind no direct heir, the horror of interregnum threatened the country. People remembered the terrible years of the Time of Troubles in the early

seventeenth century when, following the passing of the childless Tsar Fedor Ivanovich and the mysterious death of the last of Ivan the Terrible's sons, Tsarevich Dmitrii, the country was beset by civil war, pillage, and ruin. In the words of one contemporary, the Russian people were locked in an "insane silence." It seemed to everyone then that the sky would collapse on the Russian land, ravaged by crime and sin, and Russia would cease to exist.

People remembered the events of the spring of 1682, when the childless tsar Fedor Alekseevich died. Then the *strel'tsy*, skillfully provoked and directed by Tsarevna Sophia, set about killing and robbing those siding with the family of the newly crowned tsar, ten-year-old Peter I. People also remembered what had happened in January 1725, when the death of Peter, who had left no will, had almost brought about an open confrontation between court factions. And now, five years later, it appeared that the specters of the Time of Troubles might once again rise from their graves. On that winter night, January 18, 1730, in the Lefortovo Palace in Moscow, the fate of Russia, a huge sleeping giant still unaware of what had come to pass, was being decided.

Peter II left neither heirs nor last will and testament. After rising to power in May 1727 thanks to Menshikov's efforts, he followed the advice of secret enemies of the Most Serene Prince and got rid of Menshikov as early as September of the same year, stripping him of ranks and exiling him to Siberia. Tall for his age and physically well-developed, young Peter had fairly early fallen into the bad company of that era's golden youth, befriending Count Ivan Dolgorukii, who was known as a profligate roisterer. After the court's move to Moscow in early 1728, Peter immersed himself fully in a world of diversions. Hunting became his passion. It is difficult to say what fate would have awaited Russia if Peter II had not died at the age of fourteen, but had lived to rule for a considerable time. Of course, personalities can change and character can develop, but still one cannot deny the impression that Peter II would have been for Russia what Louis XV had been as the king of France, a symbol of depravity and shamelessness.

But fate would have it otherwise, and therefore the people who were present in the palace on the night of January 18, 1730, were tormented by one question: Who would take power? Would it be the offspring of Peter the Great and Catherine I, their twenty-year-old daughter, Elizaveta Petrovna, or would it be their two-year-old grandson, Charles Peter Ulrich, the son of the already deceased Anna Petrovna and Charles Frederick, Duke of Holstein-Gottorp? Or maybe, as after the death of the last tsar of the ancient dynasty founded by Riurik, another dynasty would begin to rule in Russia.

The Dolgorukii princes were dreaming of just that. They were also of the Riurik lineage, belonging to a more distant branch, and they had almost always been shunted to the political sidelines. Only during the short reign of Peter II did they, thanks to Ivan Dolgorukii's status as favorite, assume leading roles in government and make gains in wealth, power, and high ranks.



Peter II. From the journal *Russkaia starina* (Russia of Old) (St. Petersburg, 1890), tip-in plate.

The favorite's father, Prince Aleksei Grigor'evich, was particularly successful. He courted the young tsar and eventually secured the ruler's betrothal to his daughter and Ivan's sister, the Princess Ekaterina Dolgorukaia. The festive engagement party had taken place on November 31, 1729. The wedding date was set for January 19, 1730. It seemed that the Dolgorukiis were on the brink of becoming related to the ruling dynasty, and out of any reach of their enemies and evil-wishers. How deep must have been their despair when they learned of their future bridegroom's fatal illness. They had to act quickly, do something.

Thus on January 18 Aleksei Dolgorukii's relatives held a secret meeting at his home. After some wrangling, a counterfeit will was written, which they had decided to read publicly as soon as Peter II had closed his eyes forever. According to this will, the tsar was supposed to have passed the throne to his future bride, Princess Ekaterina Alekseevna Dolgorukaia. Prince Ivan



Ivan A. Dolgorukii. From I. N. Bozherianov, "*Nevskii prospekt.*" *Kul'turno-istoricheskii ocherk dvukhvekovoi zhizni Sankt-Peterburga* ("Nevskii Prospect." A Cultural and Historical Sketch of St. Petersburg at Two Hundred) (St. Petersburg, 1901–03), vol. 1, p. 52.

Dolgorukii even signed one of the copies of the will on behalf of the tsar. How did the Dolgorukiis dare to do such a thing? They were by no means naive simpletons who did not understand that in creating this false document they were committing a serious national crime, for which exile to Siberia would have been a mild punishment. We do not know which motivated them most, frivolity, arrogance, confidence that they could get away with it, or desperation. But the opinion of contemporaries has been passed on to us that the Dolgorukii clan had never been known for its intelligence, a quality essential to successful politics.

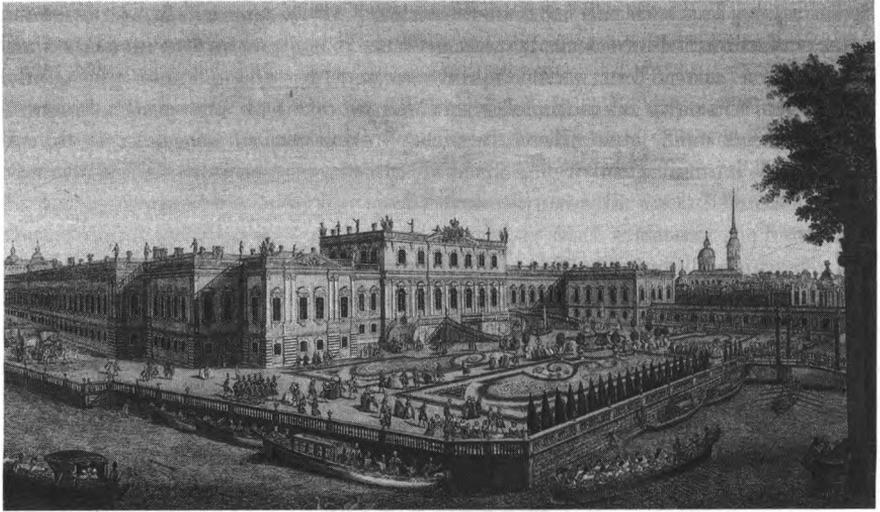
Immediately following the death of Peter II, the Supreme Privy Council, Russia's highest government body, convened in the Lefortovo Palace. In addition to the four members of the Council—Chancellor Count Gavriil Golovkin, Prince Dmitrii Golitsyn, and the Dolgorukii princes Aleksei and

CHAPTER 4

The Russian Aphrodite (Elizabeth)

In the dead of night on November 25, 1741, Iakov Shakhovskoi, the senate procurator-general, was awakened by a loud knock at the door. “You can imagine, my benevolent reader, what a confused state I was in!” wrote Shakhovskoi in his memoirs. “Having no information about such undertakings, nor even expecting them to ever take place, my first thought was that the official must have gone mad to disturb me so and then to leave abruptly; but soon I saw many people, crowded in unusual bunches, running past my windows and heading in the direction of the palace, and I made immediately for that place myself . . . I did not have to think long about which palace to go to.”¹ Everybody was hurrying in the direction of the Tsaritsyn Lug—the Field of Mars, where the palace of Tsarevna Elizabeth Petrovna was located. On that dark and frosty night the palace shone with lights. The merry shouts of the Guards, grouped around bonfires made right in the street, and a huge crowd of idlers who had blocked all approaches to the residence of Peter the Great’s daughter—all this gave testimony that while the procurator-general had been asleep a coup d’état had taken place in the capital, and power had passed into Elizabeth’s hands. That is how the glorious era of Empress Elizabeth began . . .

I believe that the experienced courtier Shakhovskoi was being somewhat disingenuous when he spoke of the confusion that had overwhelmed him that night: like many others, he had probably known well in advance about the impending coup. It had long been an open secret. Grand Duchess Anna Leopoldovna, regent of the infant-emperor Ivan Antonovich, and her



Summer Palace of Elizabeth Petrovna. From I. N. Bozherianov, “*Nevskii prospekt.*” *Kul’turno-istoricheskii ocherk dvukhvekovoi zhizni Sankt-Peterburga* (“*Nevskii Prospekt.*” A Cultural and Historical Sketch of St. Petersburg at Two Hundred) (St. Petersburg, 1901–03), vol. 1, p. 118.

ministers had been warned several times about their aunt Elizabeth’s ambitious intentions. This information had been procured by Anna Leopoldovna’s spies, and foreign diplomats had also written as much. But a certain letter from Breslau in Silesia had worried the prime minister Andrei Ivanovich Osterman most of all. A well-informed agent had reported that Elizabeth’s conspiracy had definitely taken shape and was very close to realization; the letter called for the immediate arrest of the tsarevna’s personal doctor, Johann Herman Lestocq, who held all the threads of the conspiracy.

Anna Leopoldovna did not listen to those who advised her to detain Lestocq. She acted in her own way: naively and stupidly. At the nearest Courtag, or reception day at court, which took place on November 23, 1741, the regent interrupted the ongoing card game, left the table, and asked her aunt to proceed with her into the neighboring room. Holding the letter from Breslau in her hands, she confronted Elizabeth, attempting to deal with the matter of conspiracy on a family basis. When the two women rejoined the guests, both appeared flurried, which was immediately noted by the foreign diplomats present at the Courtag. Shortly thereafter, Elizabeth went home. As General Christoph Herman Manstein wrote in his notes: “Princess Elizabeth was not at all disconcerted. She protested to the grand duchess that she had never had the thought of undertaking the least thing either against her or against her son; that she was too religious to break the oath that she had sworn; that all of these reports came only from her enemies, who wanted

to make her unhappy; that . . .”² In a word, tears began to flow, and all suspicions were drowned in their streams, for even the simpleminded investigator Anna Leopol’dovna joined Elizabeth in her weeping, and actually was made to believe, to her misfortune, in the tsarevna’s innocence.

When Elizabeth returned to her apartments she was horror-stricken. She knew all too well that if Lestocq were arrested the plot would be foiled—the talkative and weak-willed French surgeon would have told everything he knew in the Secret Chancery at the very first sight of the rack. And then prison or a remote monastery, taking the veil, and farewell forever to the sweet life! No, Elizabeth could not bear the thought of all that! Having set out on the road of falsehood and sedition, she decided to see it through to the end. Approximately twenty-four hours later, in the dark early morning hours of November 25, 1741, after the tsarevna fervently and tearily prayed to God, she put on a cavalry cuirass, climbed into a sleigh, and rode hurriedly through the dark and blizzard-swept streets of the capital to the barracks of the Preobrazhenskii Regiment.

The Preobrazhenskii Regiment was waiting for Elizabeth. Her face flushed from the frost and anxiety, she was beautiful as Venus, but laconic as Julius Caesar, when she addressed the grenadiers: “My friends! Just as you served my father faithfully, in the present situation likewise show your loyalty to me!” The grenadiers answered in chorus: “We will be glad to die for your majesty and for our motherland!”³ And they rushed behind their charming leader toward the Winter Palace.

It goes without saying that the grenadiers were not raised from their beds as suddenly as Procurator-General Iakov Shakhovskoi. They had been prepared for Elizabeth’s coup long in advance. Tentative talks, hints dropped by trusted proxies, and finally money and promises had done their work. But all the same, so successful a beginning could be explained primarily by a political state of affairs that worked largely to Elizabeth’s advantage. Troubled times had ensued following Anna Ioannovna’s death in the autumn of 1740. Standing at the head of state (or more exactly, lying in a cradle) was the two-month-old emperor Ivan Antonovich, son of the regent Anna Leopol’dovna and Anton Ulrich, prince of Brunswick. A desperate struggle immediately broke out around the tiny emperor’s throne. At first Empress Anna Ioannovna’s former favorite, Ernst Johan Biron, took power into his hands; three weeks later he was overthrown by Burkhard Münnich, who was then replaced by Andrei Osterman.

Many Russians, and primarily the Guards, were indignant at this reshuffling around the throne, often led by foreigners in Russian service. They were disgusted with Anna Leopol’dovna’s and the whole Brunswick family’s lack of authority. Tsarevna Elizabeth Petrovna was able to take advantage of this discontent. She was especially popular among the Guards of lower ranks—simple soldiers: of 308 rank-and-file men who set out with Elizabeth to the Winter Palace there were only 54 noblemen, less than twenty percent. The

remainder were the descendants of peasants, clergy, small landholders, and even *khology* (slaves). And although they had already broken their previous class ties and acquired a typically praetorian mentality of dull-witted solidarity, unceremonious disdain toward high officials, and overweening pride in their own role in the fate of the throne and country, their sympathies were on the side of the daughter of the great tsar Peter I and the Livland laundress.

The nobility, and especially its highborn members, now as earlier scorned Elizabeth, whose lowly and illegitimate origin (Elizabeth was born before Peter and Catherine were married) and commoner's behavior jarred upon them.

But the soldiers of the guards liked this good-looking young woman. She consorted with them easily, as her great father had done. Moreover, Elizabeth had even become related to many of the grenadiers, willingly responding to their invitations to be godmother of their children. And the relationship of godparents, according to Russian Orthodox tradition, entitled one to use the familiar form of address, and was considered very close because it came from God. And so we can read in the reports of the French envoy Chetardy how Münnich came to deliver his New Year's greetings to the tsarevna in 1741 and was dumbfounded by the spectacle he witnessed: "The vestibule, stairway, and lobby were packed full of Guards unceremoniously calling the princess their godmother. For over a quarter of an hour he was unable to come to his senses in Princess Elizabeth's presence, neither hearing nor seeing anything."⁴

The strength of the Guards' godmother, Elizabeth, lay in the fact that she was Peter the Great's daughter, who, in the guards' opinion, had been unjustly deprived of the throne after Peter II's death. And having seen the crowds of Guards in Elizabeth's palace, the old field marshal Münnich rightly appraised the situation.

The Guards' dissatisfaction with the regent's weak regime combined with their idealization of Peter as a severe but just ruler, who took care of his subjects, in contrast to the nonentities who flocked around the throne of Ivan Antonovich. This idealization spread in full measure to his daughter, in whom the Guards saw the heir of Peter's great but interrupted policies. Almost a third of the Guards who helped Elizabeth seize the throne had begun their service under Peter, according to an extant list of participants in the coup. By 1741 they were gray-haired veterans around fifty years old, who told stories of the glorious summers spent side-by-side with the great tsar, and of the blond girl who was his favorite daughter and had grown up before their eyes. The younger soldiers (120 of them in number, more than a third of the regiment) greedily drank in these stories. They had been inducted into the Guards toward the end of Anna Ioannovna's reign. Biron had been the initiator of this. Fearing noble freethinkers in Guards' uniforms, the favorite began renewing the Guards with recruits from the peasantry and

CHAPTER 5

The Sovereign of the North

(Catherine the Great)

On September 23, 1785, the French envoy Louis Philippe d'Agusseau Comte de Ségur was walking fast through the Winter Palace halls heading for his first audience with Catherine the Great. He was in agitation and tried in vain to recollect the words of the official welcoming speech he was to deliver before the empress. Let's follow the count in order to be there by the time the audience begins.

Having passed through several rooms he found himself in front of a closed door: "all of a sudden the door to the room containing the empress was opened. She was richly dressed and standing up, hand resting on a column; her majestic air, the dignity of her demeanor, the pride of her regard, her rather theatrical pose, in taking me by surprise, succeeded in making an indelible impression," as Ségur recollected later.¹

Many people had a similar experience when they encountered the empress for the first time. Statesmen, diplomats, military leaders would grow pale and feel embarrassed the moment they saw her. The famous French writer Denis Diderot simply went rigid, and Baron Melchior Grimm, Catherine's old correspondent, became muddled and confused when he first met her in 1774.

No wonder the visitors were overwhelmed when they found themselves standing before this unusually dazzling woman, whose fame had rung throughout the world and whose majestic appearance shining amid the splendor of the Winter Palace was in full accord with this fame. However, after a minute or two, the quiet, cordial, even sweet tone of her voice would change the entire atmosphere. All embarrassment and constraint vanished, and before



Grand Duchess Catherine Alekseevna. From I. N. Bozherianov, “*Nevskii prospekt.*” *Kul’turno-istoricheskii ocherk dvukhvekovoi zhizni Sankt-Peterburga* (“*Nevskii Prospect.*” A Cultural and Historical Sketch of St. Petersburg at Two Hundred) (St. Petersburg, 1901–03), vol. 1, p. 159.

long Catherine’s visitors felt like new friends at ease with her. The empress’s simplicity, combined with an inherent sense of dignity, immediately impressed her interlocutor. This contradicted certain opinions circulating about Catherine the Great as a kind of Semiramis of the North! In 1787, she wrote

to Grimm: "The prince of Ligne confessed to me that on his first trip he expected, upon seeing me, to see a large woman, as stiff as a post, who only spoke in proclamations and demanded to be always admired, and that he was very relieved to have been mistaken and to find a being with whom one could speak and who liked to have a chat."²

After some time had passed, the visitor, having had a closer look at Catherine, would notice that she was far from being beautiful. Chancellor Mikhail Vorontsov's secretary, Jean-Louis Favier, spoke rather severely of our heroine at age thirty-five: "It would be wrong to say that she is a dazzling beauty: her waist is fairly long, slim, but not flexible; she has a noble carriage, but her gait is affected and not graceful; her breast is narrow, her face is long, especially her chin; she has a continual smile on her lips, but her mouth is flat and indented; her nose has a slight hook; her eyes are small but her look is vivacious and pleasant; her face has pockmarks. She is rather more beautiful than ugly, but one is not likely to take fancy to her."³

The English diplomat John Hobart, the second Earl of Buckingham, had another opinion of her. He did not see any traces of smallpox on her face because Catherine had never been ill with this disease. However, he agreed with Favier that "her features are far from being fine and regular to make up what is considered to be a true beauty." Yet in his view, she did have a special charm: "An excellent complexion, vivid and clever eyes, a pleasantly outlined mouth, and splendid chestnut-colored hair—all of these put together create an appearance which, many years ago, could not have left a man indifferent unless he was prejudiced and insensitive." Catherine was then thirty-three, a rather venerable age according to criteria of the eighteenth century. However, the count corrects himself on the spot, claiming that she had what people often like and what attracts much more than beauty: a good figure, beautiful neck and arms, and all of the parts of her body formed gracefully so that both feminine and masculine attire suit her; blue eyes whose liveliness was softened by the languor of her gaze, sensitive but not bland. She attached little importance to costume, yet she was always dressed too well for a woman who is indifferent to her appearance.⁴

Three more decades passed, and another of Catherine's guests, the count Joachim Sternberg, wrote a note in his memorandum book, which was almost the same as that recorded by his predecessor: medium height, sturdy constitution, long face, hooked and well-outlined nose, which imparts a serious expression to her face; shining and vivid eyes, and high forehead. Count Sternberg, however, made one mistake that Catherine undoubtedly would have resented—her nose was considered to be absolute perfection. It was not only not hooked, it was absolutely straight, a Greek nose, and Catherine wrote with pride that in profile she was the very image of Alexander the Great, which is the impression one gets after examining the cameos of Catherine in the Hermitage collection.

But let us return to an audience with the empress. Listening to her speak in exquisite French, the guests would conclude that the empress was an intelligent woman with extensive knowledge, whose opinions on various subjects were deeply founded and original. Prince Charles Henri Nassau-Siegen, who accompanied Catherine during her trip to the Crimea in 1787, wrote with unrestrained wonder: "Indeed, I admire her, and my admiration grows with each passing day, the simplicity of her manners can hardly be imagined. Her talk is charming and when it deals with serious matters, her astute opinions indicate her broad knowledge and correct reasoning. She would make the most attractive private person."⁵

And when she started laughing merrily at her interlocutor's joke, replying in the same tone, it became clear that Catherine also possessed a subtle sense of humor, and her gay and infectious laughter revealed an easy disposition and an optimistic nature full of *joie de vivre*.

That is the way it was. Catherine considered optimism or joviality, as they called it in those days, to be one of her primary virtues. "One must be jovial," she wrote to Mrs. Bielke, one of her mother's girlfriends, in 1766. "This alone helps and endures to overcome all things. I know that from my own experience: I have had to endure and overcome quite a lot in my life, but I laughed when I could, and I swear to you that even now when I have so many difficulties in my present position, when I have a chance I gladly play blindman's bluff with my son and often without him."⁶ This was not due solely to her nature; Catherine was convinced that human genius manifests itself in optimism. When she learned that Frederick II was a jovial person, she remarked that this feature undoubtedly sprung from a feeling of superiority, and had there ever been a great man who was not noted for his joviality, and who did not have an inexhaustible supply of it? Catherine's own supply did seem to have no end. Only months before her death she wrote to Grimm that she felt well, happy, and as light as a bird.

And so it was with regret that Ségur bid farewell to the charming sovereign and left the Throne Room. Certain visitors, however, whom the empress bestowed with kindness, simply went into rapture: Diderot clung to her by the hands, while Grimm asked her to install him in her study as a pet pug. We, dear readers, not wishing to disturb Catherine, shall follow Ségur out of Catherine's study and retire to the archives and libraries trying to find out more in detail about the sovereign Catherine the Great.

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She did not like to celebrate her birthdays. "Each time [I have a birthday] I receive as a gift one more year, something which I would willingly pass up. To tell the truth, it would be a charming thing to have an empress who was only fifteen years old her whole life."⁷ And she tried all ways to avoid congratulations and festivities that mark the day some people for some reason consider to be the main day in the year. For Catherine it was an ordinary